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THE “DARK SIDE” OF HUMOUR. AN ANALYSIS OF SUBVERSIVE HUMOUR IN WORKPLACE EMAILS

Abstract

Although a substantial amount of research has investigated the various functions of humour in a workplace context, electronic means of communication have largely been ignored. This is particularly surprising since electronic communication in the workplace is increasingly gaining significance. This seems to be especially true for email, which in many workplaces is the preferred medium for communicating transactional as well as relational topics. Drawing on a corpus of about 100 emails collected in an academic setting, we explore how humour is used in workplace emails. Our specific focus is on subversive humour, which often functions as a tool to express frustration and dissent, and ultimately to challenge existing power relations. Our analysis illustrates that subversive humour is an excellent means to make fun of established and normative workplace practices by exaggerating and ridiculing them, and to re-define organisational reality by offering alternative interpretations. These functions of subversive humour appear to be particularly useful for those in relatively powerful positions: by employing humour to convey critical and potentially threatening messages in acceptable ways, the senders manage to express their dissent and frustration with the wider organisational system while, at the same time, escaping the scrutiny of the very organisation that they are symbolically challenging.

Keywords

Subversive humour, email, workplace.

1. Introduction

Although humour and work are often viewed as mutually exclusive, the increasing body of research on humour in the workplace has identified a myriad of

positive interpersonal functions this supposedly irrelevant device may perform. In particular, it has been argued that humour has the potential to increase employees' job satisfaction and performance (Caudron 1992; Clouse & Spurgeon 1995; Consalvo 1989), as well as their creativity and productivity (Caudron 1992; Fatt 2000; Morreall 1991). Furthermore, humour has been identified as facilitating teamwork and creating a sense of belonging (Caudron 1992; Duncan et al. 1990; Holmes et al. 2001; Morreall 1991), boosting employees' morale, for example by defusing conflict and spicing up routines (Caudron 1992; Clouse & Spurgeon 1995; Ehrenberg 1995; Morreall 1991). And it has been argued that humour may help employees deal with stress and change (Caudron 1992; Clouse & Spurgeon 1995; Duncan et al. 1990; Fatt 2000; Morreall 1991).

Empirical studies conducted in a wide range of different workplaces, including a hotel kitchen (Brown & Keegan 1999), a police department (Pogrebin & Poole 1988), hospital settings (Coser 1960; Pizzini 1991; Ulloth 2003; Rosenberg 1998), white-collar workplaces, and factories (Holmes 1998, 2000; Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Consalvo 1989; Seckman & Couch 1989), have illustrated that while the main functions of most (if not all) instances of humour are to reinforce solidarity and create a sense of belonging among colleagues humour was also shown to be employed as a means to mitigate negatively affective speech acts (e.g. to hedge a criticism or directive), in particular when issued upwards. However, as a small number of studies have pointed out, there is also a “darker side” (Holmes & Marra 2002: 83) to humour, namely when it is used as a legitimate means of expressing dissent and challenging established workplace practices and realities. This is particularly true for subversive humour, i.e. humour that more or less explicitly challenges existing power relations, and subverts the status quo.

In a study of humour in a lorry factory, Collinson (1988) found that humour was frequently used by the workers as a means to express their frustration and conflict while at the same time maintaining social order. For the workers in his study, humour was a means of venting their frustration and dissatisfaction without challenging existing power relations. These observations are supported by Lynch (2002: 435) who noted that humour in the workplace can often function as “both control and resistance simultaneously.” Similar to Collinson (1988), Lynch (2002) also argued that by using humour, individuals may release tension while at the same time maintaining the status quo.

A range of valuable functions of subversive humour in the workplace were also observed by Rodrigues and Collinson (1995). In their study on Telecom in Brazil, they observed that staff used humour as a safety valve for channelling emotions and expressing dissatisfaction, as well as to articulate workers' attempts at “re-affirming the status quo” (Rodrigues and Collinson 1995: 759). Their study revealed that members of this company used humour as “a satirical critique, facilitating radical change” (Rodrigues & Collinson 1995: 759). This was

particularly true for written humour in the form of cartoons, which were published in the company's internal journal. These humorous metaphors provided relatively safe and creative channels through which employees could express their dissent by exploiting the inherent ambiguity of the humour.

However, subversive humour was not only found in blue-collar workplaces but was also present in the meetings that Holmes (2000), Holmes and Mara (2002), and Mullany (2007) recorded in several white-collar organisations. In a study of business meetings, Holmes and Marra (2002) found that in these relatively formal contexts, humour was sometimes employed by subordinates as a means to challenge and criticise their superiors. In these relatively formal meetings, humour appeared to be an acceptable means of expressing disagreement and questioning decisions, thereby registering a protest, or even challenging more powerful participants. Employed in this way, humour may support subordinates in their attempts to subvert the existing power structure. These findings were supported by Mullany (2007: 163) who observed that the professionals in their workplaces employed subversive humour in order to criticise and challenge those in power, as well as to "maintain solidarity and collegiality among those who partake in the humour."

In this paper we want to further explore this "dark side" of humour, in particular its functions in a workplace context. However, while most previous research has looked at spoken humour and has largely ignored other media (with the exception of Rodrigues & Collinson (1995) who looked at the use of humour (mostly in form of cartoons) in the company's newspaper), our focus is on the occurrence of subversive humour in emails.

As Holmes and Marra (2002: 84) noted, humour "is a very effective means of challenging the status quo in socially acceptable and linguistically sophisticated ways." In their analysis of subversive humour in spoken workplace interactions (2002: 81), they identified three levels of subversion: "the individual, the group or organisation, and the wider society."¹ Subversive humour is characteristic of spoken contexts, particularly business meetings (see also Mullany 2007). Subversive humour which is targeted at individuals may not be typical of email communication in the workplace because of the "permanence/persistence" factor (email leaves an electronic "paper trail") coupled with the desire to avoid the "anonymity effect," whereby the lack of visual cues may foster misunderstandings. Accordingly, the subversive humour in our email data was directed at the level of the organisation, functioning as what Holmes and Marra (2002: 81) describe as "expressing dissatisfaction with official organisational attitudes and values, or indirectly criticising the goals of the wider organisation." Thus, the humour in our

¹ Subversive humour may not be targeted at the wider society in workplace emails for lack of relevance in many instances (for instance, in some workplace scenarios it may not always meet the goals of the emailer to comment on the wider society).

data was not directed towards its targets, but rather, was skilfully woven into *ex parte* communications addressed to other members who might have been equally affected by the organisational practices that were mocked.

2. Email at work

There is little doubt that email is increasingly gaining importance in the workplace—it has even started to replace other more traditional ways of communication (Waldvogel 2007). The uniqueness of email as a communication medium is owed to its intrinsic nature as an oral-written hybrid medium: as a written medium, it allows its users intense, regular, and potentially persistent contact with their own discourse, with the potential of metalinguistic awareness (even “hyperawareness”) of written language: as an oral-linked medium, its turns are often short and frequent (see Rowe 2001, 2007). Already, written language is typically less spontaneous than oral language. But in the workplace, email—unlike the old-fashioned office memo (which still persists in some aspects of department life, such as meeting agendas and minutes)—encourages small, frequent communications, rather than the weekly saved-up laundry list of items typical of the old hardcopy office memo practice. Furthermore, with its “include previous message” feature, it also serves as an efficient correspondence and recordkeeping tool (Waldvogel 2005; Rowe 2001, 2007).

However, email is not only a valuable tool to convey transactional information but is equally suited for doing relational work (e.g. Abdullah 2003; Rowe 2001, 2007). Sproull and Kiesler (1986), for instance, emphasise the various advantages of email for interpersonal relationships among colleagues. They note that “[t]he real value of [email] could be increased sociability and organisational attachment. [...] it is a relatively efficient medium for sociability” (1986: 1511). It thus appears crucial to include email into analyses of workplace communication, and more specifically, to explore the ways in which workplace relations are constructed and negotiated throughout people’s working days.

Our aim is to explore how humour is used in workplace emails as a tool to express frustration and dissent, and ultimately to challenge existing power relations. In particular, we focus on two functions of humour which are employed in order to achieve this: making fun of established and normative workplace practices by exaggerating and ridiculing them, and re-defining reality by offering alternative interpretations. These two strategies are by no means mutually exclusive, and, in fact, as we will illustrate, often occur simultaneously in workplace emails. In our analysis of subversive humour in workplace emails, we draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA). Due to its focus on the intricate relationship between discourse and power (Van Dijk 2001; Fairclough & Wodak

1997; Wodak 2001), critical discourse analysis provides an excellent tool for analysing the ways in which humour may be used as a means to resist and challenge existing power relations.

3. Methodological challenges and identifying humour in emails

The data on which the subsequent analysis draws was collected as part of a larger corpus of workplace emails. Overall, the corpus consists of more than 300 emails collected in three different organisations in Hong Kong. At each organisation, we asked volunteers to print out a sample of their everyday workplace emails which they considered to adequately reflect the types of emails they write over a period of a week. Participants were also asked to delete with a black marker any kind of information which they did not want to disclose. After they had given us their email samples, we replaced real names of persons, organisations and specific projects with pseudonyms in order to ensure that participants could not be identified.

This procedure had several advantages: firstly, leaving the decision of which emails to pass on to participants (the only requirement being that their email sample should be representative of one week's workplace emails) meant that our corpus is indeed relatively representative of participants' typical workplace email and is less liable to our personal judgements; and secondly, asking participants to give us emails which they had written a while ago, prior to our request, precluded the observer's paradox.

One of the problems of exploring the use of humour in emails is the identification of humorous instances. Identifying humour is always a problematic undertaking, in particular for outsiders who are not fully familiar with the discursive practices that characterise the ways in which humour is typically performed in these workplaces (Cosier 1960; Pogrebin & Poole 1986). In particular, since our focus was on emails rather than on spoken interactions, we could not draw on prosodic features in identifying and interpreting potential instances of humour (Mullany 2004; Schnurr *fc*; Holmes 2000; Holmes & Marra 2002). In order to minimise the impact of these issues, several measures were taken: firstly, in identifying humorous instances we primarily relied on contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1999), and, in some cases, the response a potentially humorous email received. And secondly, once we had identified a range of potential instances of humour, we talked to our participants in order to understand whether (and sometimes even why) they considered a particular remark to be humorous. This method enabled us to gain a better understanding of the email practices of our participants and particularly the ways in which they typically used humour in their workplace emails.

In this paper we draw on a particularly interesting subset of our larger corpus, namely academic emails. In particular, we look at the ways in which a relatively senior academic staff member (pseudonym Richard), who works in one of the universities in Hong Kong, employs subversive humour in his emails to express his frustration and dissent, and ultimately to challenge existing power relations. Of the more than 100 emails that we have collected from Richard, a substantial amount (i.e. approximately a quarter of all emails) contain subversive humour. This observation is particularly noteworthy since subversive humour in the emails of other participants in any of the workplaces is very rare. In Richard’s emails, the use of subversive humour is quite remarkable and seems to follow a certain pattern in the way it is constructed, as well as in the various functions it performs.

4. Analysis

As our analysis will illustrate, subversive humour is not only a tool frequently used by relatively powerless speakers, such as subordinates in a workplace context (see e.g. Holmes & Marra 2002), but may also skilfully be used by those in relatively senior positions as it enables them to communicate both a serious, work-related message while also expressing their dissent. When employed by those in powerful positions, then, subversive humour may function as a means to challenge and question the wider system or, in our case, ridicule and thereby criticise established bureaucratic norms in relatively acceptable ways. We focus here on two ways in which this is achieved in our email data, namely making fun of established and normative practices, and re-defining organisational reality.

4.1. Making fun of established and normative practices

In this category we discuss those emails in which the writer employs subversive humour as a means to symbolically resist and challenge certain aspects of organisational reality by making fun of established norms and practices. In CDA terms, these practices have become “naturalized” (Fairclough 1989), i.e. they may come to seem like the only possible or normal ways of doing (and talking about) things. By ridiculing these practices, which are often followed without being questioned (since they have become part of the taken-for-granted way of doing things in a particular workplace), they are made visible and brought to the reader’s attention. Through this process, they become open for criticism and potential change. And subversive humour is one way of bringing these naturalised ways of talking to the fore and, thereby, opening them to questioning and challenging. In the majority of our email data, this is achieved by incorporating humorous (often

ironic or sarcastic) quips into otherwise serious email texts. Examples 1 and 2 provide paradigmatic examples of this.

At the time when Richard wrote the emails discussed here, he was the Head of the School in one of Hong Kong's many universities. There is abundant evidence in our email corpus that transactional emails like this one are representative of the kinds of emails that Richard would typically send to the members of his school: part of his job was to regularly circulate emails to the other staff members in order to keep them informed about the latest developments in a particular reform, to make announcements, or simply to communicate decisions that would affect them and that had been reached elsewhere. Example 1 was sent to all academic staff at Richard's school.

Example 1²

Subject: Salary Adjustments

Dear all

You will have received a document entitled [name] which allows certain categories of staff to apply for a salary increment.

My reading of this document is that the following are NOT eligible: staff with tenure who are at the top of the scale; PDFs; lecturers retitled to Assoc Prof who are at the top of the scale; senior lecturers who have been retitled to Professor who are at the top of the scale; staff with contracts less than one year; staff with fixed salary contracts who received an increment on their last contract renewal; **cast members of HK Disney**. I'm not sure about staff on contract who have NOT been retitled who are at the top of the scale—or am I missing something?

If you think you are eligible for this, please let me know and we can check with HR to make sure—if you wish to apply you need to complete a [performance] review.

Thanks
Rich

The main purpose of the email was to inform the other academic staff members about their eligibility to apply for salary adjustments (as is reflected, for instance, in the subject line). However, what makes this email stand out from the majority of Richard's transactional messages is his use of subversive humour (highlighted in bold in the example): the humorous reference to "cast members of HK Disney"³ as also not being entitled to a salary increase, is very marked in the otherwise serious

² The subversive humour is highlighted in bold in the examples.

³ 'HK Disney' refers to the Disneyland fun-park in Hong Kong.

tone of the email. The humour thus assigns particular emphasis to the message conveyed.

Richard’s use of subversive humour, in particular his ironic implication that hardly anyone is entitled to a salary adjustment, which is embedded in a very professional and serious matter-of-fact text, enables him to communicate both the transactional information (i.e. who is entitled to a salary adjustment and the procedures involved in applying), as well as his dissent and frustration about the situation of highly restricted eligibility, which prevents him from taking care of his staff in the way he would like to do. To the addressees of the email, the humorous quip not only communicates this ambiguity in meaning but also indicates Richard’s personal attitude towards this matter.

With this ironic comment, Richard makes fun of the established (and often bureaucratic) ways of doing things at his workplace: once decisions have been reached, documents are circulated to all staff, which then require some kind of “translation” in order to be understood. And (as the last paragraph of his email explicates), typically, once the content of a document is understood, it requires certain steps of verification (e.g. double-checking with HR) and particular procedures to be followed (e.g. the completion of a [performance] review), an often very lengthy and tedious process which needs to be followed before anything is done. His frustration about the overly bureaucratic system that characterises his workplace is further revealed in a supportive commiseration that Richard made to the new Head of School, to whom he complained that he sometimes has the feeling that “the university thinks we [i.e. Heads of School] are full-time administrators” and that “the university has no head and no heart, only hands.” Using subversive humour to convey his attitude when informing staff about required procedures provides a valuable means for Richard to communicate his dissent and frustration with these lengthy bureaucratic steps. A similar effect is achieved by the subversive humour in example 2, which was also sent to all staff members at Richard’s school.

Example 2

Subject: **air-conditioning wars**

Dear all

Please note that there will be no air-conditioning in offices this friday (public holiday) and **the summer regime will come into force** next week, which means that air-conditioning will only be available for restricted hours (I think it is going off at 7:00pm). Last summer **after heroic resistance led by Henry “rage against the machine” Morris** we were able to get exemptions up to 9:00 p.m. If you wish to make a case, I will forward your request to the **air-conditioning czar**; please give the dates you will be in HK and a reason, i.e. you are working on a research project.

Thanks
Rich

This is another email in which Richard uses subversive humour to make fun of the established norms prescribed by the bureaucratic system of administrivia at this university workplace. The humour mainly derives from the terms of address which Richard assigns to two of his colleagues. Henry Morris, a colleague from another school, who also features as the butt of humour in some of Richard's other emails, is given a humorous middle name with the effect that the structure "Henry 'rage against the machine' Morris" resembles the name of a warrior, and echoes the name of a music band with an explicitly political agenda (called "Rage Against the Machine"). The war frame (cf. Lakoff 2006) is also invoked in the subject line of the email "air-conditioning wars," as well as the "heroic resistance"; and also invokes the sub-frame of totalitarianism in the terms "regime," "coming into force," and "czar."

As in example 1, the quip is embedded in an otherwise relatively serious and formal message, which advises staff members about the procedures for requesting air-conditioning in their offices after hours. However, in contrast to example 1, in this example the subject line and the mention of "the summer regime" coming "into force" (when referring to a change in the season when air-conditioning would be used) prepare the readers for the humour. It is thus less spontaneous and provides less of a "surprise" effect in the message than does example 1. But as in example 1, in addition to providing the transactional information, Richard also conveys his disapproval of the situation. In particular, the intertextual link to the pop band "Rage Against the Machine" adds another, more political, dimension to his email. Similar to the band who encourage their fans "to get involved whether you are currently an activist or plan on starting now" (www.ratm.com), Richard's message can also be read as a complaint and perhaps even an encouragement to change what appear to be arbitrary decisions made by "the air-conditioning czar" and "the summer regime." This humorous term of address clearly has a critical edge to it, as it evokes connotations of misuse of power, arbitrary decision making, and non-democratic gaining and exercising of power. With his description of the air-conditioning regulations, then, Richard also attempts to re-define this aspect of organisational reality as being borne out of a non-democratic system where most decisions are made unilaterally by those in power.

Similarly critical, albeit less political, messages are conveyed in examples 3 and 4.

Example 3

Subject: rectification of names

Dear all

Initially, the dean proposed that our School be called “[name]” in Chinese, but as you can see below the Chinese department wants to retain its old name in Chinese whilst being called a “school” in English, so the suggestion is that we also keep our former name in Chinese, i.e. “[name]”—I have told Robert that I have no objection to this but in case you do object, please let me know—anyway this may not be the last of the matter. **Semiotic readings of this to me on a postcard...**

have a good summer
Rich

This email displays the same pattern as examples 1 and 2: the humorous comment is embedded in an otherwise serious work email that severs the main purpose of informing staff about a certain action. Email 3 was sent during the semester break when many staff members were on holiday, which is also reflected in the “have a good summer” closing that, not incidentally, is, like the subject line, all in lower case.

Occurring at the end of the message, the humour clearly gives away Richard’s view on the discussion about appropriate Chinese names for the school (as outlined in the email). However, the email not only expresses Richard’s dissent of the entire matter (by using subversive humour to invite staff to send their comments as “semiotic readings of this to me on a postcard”), but at the same time also more or less officially informs them about the decisions that were reached and invites them—in case of any objection—to express their opinions.

The humour in this communication is multi-faceted: as Head of School, it was Richard’s goal to communicate a solution to a problem. Though he normally seeks feedback from staff before implementing a change of this type that affects the entire school, the fact that it is summer vacation meant that many staff members would be incommunicado. It thus appears that he hoped to simply make the “executive decision” unilaterally without much ado, which is reflected in the final line. By cynically requesting “semiotic readings,” he lets staff know that it is not really an academic decision of great weight requiring their input (thus clearing the path for his executive decision), and by humorously requesting this information on a postcard, he is metaphorically laying out the maximum amount of space and effort that staff should devote to input (which again frees him to make the decision alone). Moreover, the postcard (see Diekmannshenke, fc) is most frequently (and certainly in this context) regarded as an informal means to communicate light, trivial messages while on vacation (a large part of the communicative message being, in fact, the typically exotic picture on the reverse side). Richard’s humour thus also releases staff from having to worry about something that he feels is arguably trivial in the greater scheme of things while they are away attending to activities abroad (conferences, vacations, etc.) and are, in essence, “off the clock.”

Drawing on subversive humour in the ways outlined above thus enables Richard to “do his job” (i.e. to pass on the transactional information to his staff) while also expressing his relatively unfavourable opinion about the whole matter.

Example 4 is the last example of subversive humour that we discuss in this category. In contrast to the previous examples, the following humorous sequence is more elaborate and consists of fantasy humour (rather than short ironic or sarcastic quips). Example 4 is an email written to Kevin, one of Richard’s colleagues. At the time when Richard wrote the email, a new online performance review for staff had just been introduced. This change involved a substantial amount of additional work for Richard (such as attending workshops and familiarising himself with the system so that he could communicate the changes and procedures to other staff). One of the tasks Richard was required to do was to use the online system to electronically assign reviewers to each member of staff.

Example 4

blood pressure

Kevin I tried to input reviewers but the system is not up yet, **at least as far as I can tell in my shufflings along the crepuscular corridors of the [performance review]—I felt a slight spike in the blood pressure** but will try to look into this this afternoon

Rich

In this email to his long-time colleague Kevin, Richard is complaining about some of the problems he is experiencing with the online system of the performance review. After informing Kevin about the fact that the online system does not yet allow him to enter the names of the reviewers, Richard uses fantasy humour to make fun of this situation. In particular, his elaborate metaphorical, literary, and simultaneously humorous description of his unsuccessful efforts to understand the system as “shufflings along the crepuscular corridors of the [review system]” and the fact that he “felt a spike in the blood pressure” indicate Richard’s frustration with the system.

As in his other emails discussed above, Richard skilfully employs subversive humour as a means to communicate the frustration and annoyance of having to deal with these administrative, bureaucratic, and (in Richard’s view) rather irrelevant issues. These “shufflings” through the “crepuscular corridors” invoke the frame of a labyrinth or cavernous structure, whereby one must feel one’s way slowly and ploddingly in the dark with a sensation of non-progression and near-futility. Using this subversive humour in describing the online performance review process as comprising “crepuscular corridors,” Richard also challenges the

dominant discourse which promotes the system as being easily accessible and having been implemented in order to facilitate staff efficiency. He thereby also re-defines this aspect of organisational reality. This function of subversive humour is now explored in more detail.

4.2. Re-defining organizational reality

In this section we draw on the idea of CDA that discourse not only reflects but *constructs* reality (Cameron 2001; Van Dijk 1997). In particular, we illustrate some of the ways in which subversive humour may be used as a means to resist dominant views of reality by offering alternative ways of understanding everyday workplace realities. In the emails that we have collected, Richard uses subversive humour to achieve these aims while at the same time symbolically challenging the system and expressing his criticism and dissent. We have chosen four representative examples to illustrate this function of subversive humour.

In contrast to most of the emails discussed in the previous section which typically contain subversive humour in the form of ironic or sarcastic quips, emails that fall into the category of re-defining organisational reality often contain more extended sequences of humour, mostly in the form of fantasy humour. Examples 5-7 are prime examples of how Richard and his colleague Kevin employ subversive humour. This email exchange was triggered by an announcement of a book reading of a former colleague who became an institutional consultant after he left the university. The novel by this former colleague, Paul Cruikshanks, depicts unfavourably a university setting that is eerily reminiscent of the university where Richard and Kevin are still employed. The announcement of the book reading prompts a parody initiated by Kevin, which is then collaboratively developed by him and Richard. We include an abbreviated version of the original announcement of the book reading here (example 5), which supports our analysis of the subversive humour in Richard’s and Kevin’s emails below.

Example 5

Subject: BOOK READING IN THE LRR BY PROFESSOR PAUL CRUIKSHANKS

Paul Cruikshanks and Rebecca Love read from Paul’s new novel [name], by Betty Man.

Eh? Who’s this Betty Man? Yes, Paul has donned an authorial disguise for this one. Why? Come on Thursday and find out! [...]

Winnie Liu⁴ is a Gen Y [...] girl—but [...], she's forced to wear a [...] disguise. [... more information about the plot deleted] What disguise can Frank be wearing? And why should the author be in disguise? Is it because he was Professor of [...] at the university for several years? [... more information about the plot deleted] Paul's second novel [name] is a sci fi about the evolution of the [...] information about the other novels deleted]. All three novels will be available on the night- and at a discount!

The LRR Management

This is the official invitation to attend a book reading of Paul Cruikshanks' latest novel. The email was sent by the organisers of the event (the Management of the LRR, a staff social organisation) to all staff members of the university. Two of the selling points of the novels and the book reading are the fact that the author, Paul Cruikshanks, was a staff member at the university many years ago, and that the plot of the novel takes place in Hong Kong. This official invitation to the book reading is parodied by Richard and his colleague Kevin in an email exchange in which they employ subversive humour to make fun of and express their dissent about the success of this former colleague at the expense of the university's reputation, as well as the university's requirement that they officially adopt the consultant's recommendations. The humorous exchange begins with an email Kevin sends to Richard.

Example 6

Re: BOOK READING IN THE LRR BY PROFESSOR PAUL CRUIKSHANKS

Come to the LRR to hear author and educator Paul Cruikshanks read from his latest novel "THE CONSULTANT."

Pauly is a Gen-Y confidence trickster from the Gold Coast (the old one!!!)⁵. Read how he cooks up the perfect sting. A master of disguises, he passes himself off as an expert and insinuates himself into the household of rich but senile Mr Yew, where he once worked as a servant. In pages of rollicking fun, see how Pauly wins the trust of his gullible employer, while pulling off trick after trick over old Yew's other employees, at one stage managing to get the entire household to spend several months in the basement of the Yew mansion writing futile self-assessments while the upper floors go up in flames! Meanwhile our loveable rogue is up to no good

⁴ We have also assigned pseudonyms to the characters in the novel in order to prevent the identification of the author and his work.

⁵ Kevin's comment '*the Gold Coast (the old one!!!)*' refers to a region in the New Territories. He presumably uses the adjective '*old*' in order to differentiate it from the relatively 'new' Gold Coast in Australia.

cracking Mr Yew’s safe. Can he be stopped before he reduces the old place to ruins and slopes off back to Oz with the swag? What do you think?

In his email to Richard, Kevin adopts the style of the original invitation to the book reading (example 5) and creates an alternative invitation to another, fictitious book reading by the same author of a fictitious novel called “the consultant.” However, in contrast to the original email, his descriptions are highly metaphorical and characterised by an ironic and even sarcastic tone with the obvious aim to criticize. Here Kevin makes fun of the fact that Paul, who once worked at the same university as a professor, in his retirement acts as a consultant, playing a crucial role in the development and implementation of a reform that both Kevin and Richard strongly oppose. The plot of the novel that Kevin puts together is a good example of how subversive humour may be used to create alternative realities—particularly in the online context (Yates 1996:108; Poster 1996).

In the plot that Kevin invents, Paul is the main player who “cooks up the perfect sting.” Paul is described not so much as a master of writing fiction (as done in example 5) but rather as a villain, “a master of disguises” and “a loveable rogue” who plays tricks on the “rich but senile Mr Yew,” which is a personalisation of the university: Mr Yew = Mr U[niversity]. Kevin then criticises Paul’s actions as “pulling off trick after trick over old Yew’s other employees.” His criticisms become relatively direct when he describes an incident at which Paul managed “to get the entire household to spend several months in the basement of the Yew mansion [i.e. the university] writing futile self-assessments while the upper floors go up in flames” while “our loveable rouge” cracks “Mr Yew’s safe”—which is a reference to the university coffers. In essence, the department, along with the rest of the university is, on the advice of this consultant, about to implement an outcomes- and self-assessment-writing exercise. The “upper floors” seems to be a metaphor of the university mission as a whole, i.e. its “head” or its “brain.”

Similar to the original invitation, Kevin’s email ends with a number of rhetorical questions outlining potential endings to this story which aims at arousing interest in potential readers. His final question “What do you think?,” while rhetorical, also serves to invite Richard to reply. Richard happily obliges, as seen in example 7.

Example 7

Re: BOOK READING IN THE LRR BY PROFESSOR PAUL CRUIKSHANKS

read also “the Great Gravy Train Robbery” in which a daring gang of villains led by Rauly⁶ “the Professor” Cruikshanks make off with the loot, Rauly eventually escapes to a tropical paradise and is drawn into a whirlwind of passion and vice; he appears with a british punk rock band (performing “never mind the outcomes!”) and escapes deportation by impregnating his exotic mestizo lover [enough, ed.]

In his reply email, Richard takes the parody about their former colleague one step further: he develops the sequence of fantasy humour initiated by Kevin by creating another fictitious novel in which Paul “the professor” and his “daring gang of villains” escape “to a tropical paradise” after they have robbed the “gravy train.”⁷ Similar to Kevin, Richard also describes Paul (whom he calls “Rauly” here) as a villain who not only acts irresponsibly (“never mind the outcomes”—a reference that also decries the consultant’s outcomes-based-learning model), but also as someone who finds loopholes to escape punishment (e.g. “by impregnating his exotic mestizo lover”—mimicking a recurring theme in Paul’s semi-autobiographical novels).

Rather than accepting the dominant view of Paul as being a successful author (and key player in organisational reform), Kevin and Richard create alternative readings of this particular aspect of organisational reality. They achieve this by re-writing the plots of Paul’s novels and by portraying him as a “villain” who acts irresponsibly and who is primarily concerned with his own financial good. However, since this email exchange takes place in private (i.e. between two colleagues) and does not involve any officials, their parody is not likely to have any effect on the other organisational members.

Their online behaviour can be described as “ranting.”⁸ However, rather than to rant with each other directly, Kevin and Richard devise a parody of subversive humour. It is particularly their use of subversive humour which enables them to vent their frustration while also treating it relatively lightly. This use of subversive humour can be viewed as an indication that they have accepted that they will not be able to change this aspect of organisational reality (i.e. the reform has already been implemented, and Paul’s role in it is generally viewed positively by those in power). This, however, prompts them to mock it and offer alternative readings. Using (subversive) humour in this context seems to be an effective way of criticising and at the same time distancing themselves from these dominant views.

⁶ We assume that ‘Rauly’ is a typing error and that Richard meant to write ‘Pauly “the professor”’.

⁷ Defined by the OED (Online) as ‘to obtain easy financial success’, and by Merriam-Webster Online as ‘a much exploited source of easy money’. (<http://www.oed.com>; <http://www.m-w.com>)

⁸ The OED (online) defines ‘ranting’ as “a piece of turgid declamation; a tirade” which is characterised by “high-flown, extravagant, or bombastic” utterances. (<http://www.oed.com>)

Examples 6 and 7 are thus good examples of subversive humour which aims at what Holmes and Marra (2002: 81) have described as “expressing dissatisfaction with official organizational attitudes and values, or indirectly criticizing the goals of the wider organization.”

In contrast to examples 6 and 7, in which the subversive humour is primarily used as a means to make fun of organisational realities by offering alternative interpretations, in the following two examples Richard employs subversive humour as a means not only to vent his frustration but also to criticise certain matters with a more or less explicit intention to trigger a change. While examples 6 and 7 were taken from a private email exchange between two colleagues, examples 8 and 9 are transactional emails whose primary purpose is to communicate information to the other staff members.

Example 8

Subject: **gunboat academia**

Dear all

[(1)–(3) deleted]

(4) We are extremely short of office space with Ben Edwardson just arrived, Susan Bennett coming next week and Peter also coming to teach. I am willing to share with Peter or Ben if necessary next term, but that still leaves us one office short. If you have any bright ideas, pls let me and LM know. The library is full of junk from the seminar room so is hard to **deploy** at short notice. **We may need to put together a tactical unit to annex some space and bring liberty, democracy and the English language to one of our feudal neighbours.**

thanks

Rich

Example 9 is an extract taken from a longer email in which Richard informs the other academic staff members in his school about a variety of administrative matters, one of them being the shortage of offices. With a number of new staff arriving shortly, the school was facing serious space problems in accommodating them. As a possible solution it was suggested to remove all items from the school library and to convert it into an office. However, this suggestion—albeit welcomed by most academic staff—would require some diplomacy to implement, since the space technically already belonged to another academic unit in the university, who had been using it as a seminar room. Richard’s subject line “gunboat diplomacy” (defined as “diplomacy supported by the use, or threatened use, of military force,” OED), his use of the word “deploy” and his humorous suggestion to “put together a tactical unit to annex some space and bring liberty, democracy and the English

language to one of our feudal neighbours” not only invokes the military (if not the war or military occupation) frame, but also mocks this diplomatic situation, while simultaneously announcing the main strategic goal of the email, namely to inform staff of the intention to negotiate. Since subversive humour in this email is targeted at interdepartmental relations (“one of our feudal neighbours”), it serves as an expression of the diplomatic situation, and provides an alternative view of organisational reality.

The next example also contains an embedded criticism of the organisational reality which Richard and the other members of his school for some time faced on a daily basis.

Example 9

Subject: chair of [academic subject area]

Dear all

I had a short meeting with the VC yesterday and he said that he had agreed terms with Davies. The appointment has still to be formally approved by Council and accepted by Davies but at present it looks likely that he will be joining **our new School of Letters and Modular Kitchenware Design** in January 2006.

Rich

This email was sent by Richard to all members of his school. Its humour derives from the title that Richard assigns to the school. Referring to this university department as “our new School of Letters and Modular Kitchenware Design” is clearly ironic. With this fictitious title Richard makes fun of and also expresses his disapproval of the recent discussions about merging several departmental units together, Richard’s department included. Similar to examples 6 and 7, the humour in this email is very explicit. Expressed as humour, the criticism is thus also relatively obvious (although still less explicit than if it had been communicated without any humour) and hard to overlook. Interestingly, the subversive humour in this email is less elaborated (although still very skilfully constructed) than in the other emails in this category, and could be classified as an ironic quip. At any rate, its function is to convey information while expressing dissatisfaction with a relatively unrelated situation.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our email examples have illustrated that subversive humour is not only a feature of spoken workplace interactions but may also be used in written

communication, specifically in emails. However, the overall use of subversive humour in this medium of communication is rather sparse, and we only have about 20 instances of this type of humour (in a corpus which contains more than 300 emails collected in three workplaces), all of which occurred in the emails collected by one participant, Richard, in an academic workplace.

In our analysis we have mainly focused on two functions of subversive humour in Richard’s emails, namely challenging established norms and re-defining organisational reality. We found that Richard employs subversive humour skilfully in order to achieve these goals. In particular, it enables him to communicate a serious work-related message while also expressing his dissent (and, at the same time, creating solidarity with the addressees of his emails). These functions, of course, are not mutually exclusive, and some of the instances in which the primary function of the subversive humour is to challenge normative ways of doing also contribute to challenging and perhaps re-defining aspects of organisational reality (see examples 2 and 4).

In spite of the fact that a vast amount of research on resistance and power has focused on the ways in which subordinates and relatively powerless individuals challenge and resist dominant organisational practices, more recent studies have acknowledged that “[t]hose in power also resist” (Fleming and Spicer 2008: 304). And using subversive humour in workplace emails is an effective means of doing this, as our analysis has illustrated. In particular, by attempting to subvert existing power relations and challenging the status quo, Richard skilfully manages to bring to the fore “naturalised” discourses, i.e. those organisational practices which have become taken-for-granted and are targets for change.

Hence, for relatively powerful organisational members, such as Richard, who was Head of School at the time when we collected the emails, subversive humour may function as a means to challenge and subvert the wider system or, in our case, ridicule and thereby criticise established bureaucratic norms in relatively acceptable ways. Employing subversive humour thus allows relatively powerful organisational members to criticise the wider organisational system without having to be held responsible. It seems that due to its inherent ambiguity, humour is an effective means of achieving this—and, more specifically, owing to its ability to convey critical intent in socially acceptable ways, subversive humour may be employed by those in powerful positions to challenge and criticise organisational norms and realities. Subversive humour thus seems to be one of the channels through which “[p]ower and resistance are closely knit together in complex and often contradictory ways” (Fleming & Spicer 2008: 304). The emails we have examined thus provide evidence of how subversive humour is a particularly valuable tool not only for powerless people (as explored in Rodrigues & Collinson 1995; Holmes & Marra 2002), but also for people in powerful positions.

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